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## THE CHALLENGES OF STUDYING THE ELEMENTS OF DIVERSITY AND UNITY IN THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

### Abstract

The paper is a fruit of a series of informal symposiums and an elective course entitled “Orient–Occident”, conducted by the author in 2016 and 2019 at the Institute of Intercultural Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The author identifies a set of issues commonly perceived as the main challenges of our age and focuses specifically on the challenge of intercultural relations in a “globalized world” to provide a critical examination of several misconceptions and conventional narratives surrounding this topic. The discussion serves as an introduction to a proposed approach to comparative study of texts of culture, developed primarily in the philosophical tradition and within the conceptual framework of the so-called New Humanism of Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) and combined with some additional components sourced from the works of Leo Strauss (1899–1973). The author argues that this approach provides a valuable exercise of imagination to students of culture and cultural diversity as it strives to strike a balance between the perception of diversity and unity in the human experience – a quality rarely displayed in contemporary cultural studies.

Key words: comparative study of cultures, humanism, Irving Babbitt, Leo Strauss, modern civilisation, globalisation, cosmopolitanism

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*Societies, cultures, and civilizations – past and present – are often incomprehensible to outsiders, but the individual's hungers, anxieties, dreams, and preoccupations have remained unchanged through millennia . . . If in some manner the voice of an individual reaches us from the remotest distance of time, it is a timeless voice speaking about ourselves.*

Eric Hoffer (1974, p. 97)

## THE CHALLENGES OF OUR AGE

It is certainly true that every age is shaped by a set of peculiar conditions and so faces a set of peculiar challenges. It is also true that every age has its special conceits. The existence of phrases such as “globalized world” and “multicultural world” speaks something of both challenges and conceits. Whether the world of today is truly “more global” and more culturally diverse than ever before is beside the point, at least in the context of this paper. What is important is the fact that the concepts of global scale and cultural diversity inhabit our imagination.

When it comes to creating global awareness, two images come to mind as artefacts of special significance. The first of these is the famous *Earthrise* photograph which was taken on December 24, 1968 by the crew of Apollo 8, the first manned mission to circumnavigate the Moon. It shows the Earth, in full colour, hovering half illuminated above the crater-covered surface of her celestial companion. A similar picture, although black-and-white and overall much cruder, was sent in 1966 by Lunar Orbiter 1 during its survey mission. *Earthrise*, however, was taken not by a robotic spacecraft but by living and breathing human beings, hence its symbolic significance. The same goes for the second image, *The Blue Marble*, captured on December 7, 1972, by the crew of Apollo 17, the last manned lunar mission to date. Arguably, this one is even more spectacular. It shows an almost fully illuminated Earth from a much closer distance of about 29,000 kilometres. It seems somewhat ironic that man had to venture into the outer space in order to truly discover his home planet, for in these two pictures the theme of “Spaceship Earth” received a tangible illustration.

Although the metaphor became very popular during the 1960s and 70s, it predates, by a wide margin, the age of space exploration. Indeed, its origins can be traced to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to *Progress*

*and Poverty* (originally published in 1879), a popular treatise on political economy written by Henry George (1881, p. 218). The general meaning of the metaphor is quite well-established, although historically it was employed in various contexts in response to shifting interests in the public discourse. Earth, as it were, is like a ship travelling through the vacuum of space. Human beings are its crew. Resources are limited and no means of evacuation, no lifeboats, are available at present. A safe voyage and survival depend on the crew working together, caring for one another and mending the ship. Originally the “Spaceship Earth” metaphor was used mainly to highlight the perceived injustice of the prevailing socio-economic order and to signal the need of change. Since we are all in this together – the thought seems to be – we might as well learn to get along, strive for social justice and mutual betterment instead of allowing the strong and cunning to selfishly exploit the meek and weak. As George Orwell put it in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, originally published in 1937:

The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody; the idea that we must all cooperate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system. (Orwell, 1958, p. 203)

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the attention shifted from the well-being of the crew to the technical condition of the raft itself. The metaphor became a rhetorical device in the context of anthropogenic risks to the entire planet and all its inhabitants – from the threat of a nuclear winter to global warming caused by carbon dioxide emissions. Wernher von Braun, for example, was fond of employing it in the public speeches he gave to praise the benefits of the space program when addressing American taxpayers. Since venturing into space for the sake of it might have seemed, to a practically-minded USA citizen, like a waste of time, money and effort, von Braun was keen to explain the usefulness of artificial satellites for the task of monitoring the condition of the planet from orbit. He invoked the “Spaceship Earth” metaphor in order to highlight the problem of finite resources available to the ever-growing population and to illustrate the existential threat posed by increasing pollution of the natural environment:

The 3.5 billion astronauts [in 1976] not only deplete the dwindling resources of spaceship Earth like drunken sailors, they also poison their life-support system as though they were implementing a global suicide pact. (Braun, 2007, p. 212)

Finally, the metaphor also found its place in the context of intercultural relations. Here, global awareness was combined with a sense of cultural diversity. The crew of the ship is not unified in terms of customs, values, beliefs and ideals, hence they are prone to distrust, misunderstanding and even physical violence. Despite this, they must work together to ensure survival and, if possible, a fair measure of well-being. Cultural tolerance, therefore, becomes a necessity. To become tolerant, one must free one's mind from the false absolutes of one's own culture. This can be achieved by fostering a kind of anthropological sensitivity through education. As Neil Postman wrote in *The End of Education*:

. . . the subject of anthropology . . . presents to us living cultures that differ widely in their worldviews and therefore helps the young to defend themselves against idolatry and false absolutes . . . I call the *Enterprise* (from *Star Trek*) as a useful metaphor of what an anthropological outlook may teach. Like our planet itself, the *Enterprise* is home to a variety of groups, not all of them Earth people. Spock, for example, is half Vulcan, and from time to time Romulans and even fearsome Klingons will share space with Earth people. Of course, they have their own spaceships, but if we can imagine . . . that all of them had to live on the *Enterprise*, we would have a fairly accurate picture of what our situation is: a community of different languages, different traditions, different physiques (and therefore different standards of beauty), and different cosmological narratives. The following questions arise: What does each group have to know about the others? What knowledge would lead to harmony? What knowledge might lead to conflict? On what basis would any group claim superiority over the others? Would it be possible to create a narrative, including a set of symbols, that would attract the allegiance of all groups? (Postman, 1996, p. 108)

Does this mean that the crewmembers of "Spaceship Earth" should renounce their respective heritages and continue their voyage under the banner of radical cultural relativism? Such an attempt would probably lead to quite an ironic outcome. Radical cultural relativism, as it is true of any extreme point of view, is itself a false absolute, a universalistic pluralism, or "a monism of universal tolerance" by virtue of asserting that "pluralism is *the right way*" (Strauss, 1997, p. 379, italics as in a source text), and as such,

since it requires absolute conformity, inevitably leads to conflict. Postman recognized this problem and offered a somewhat idealistic solution:

There is, of course, a clear ideological bias to anthropology, as there is to the theme of the spaceship Earth – that ignorance, distrust, and intolerance of difference are dangers to the spaceship and that anything that might be done to reduce them helps to ensure everyone's survival. But I must add at once that such an outlook does not necessarily lead to an uncritical relativism. The Vulcans, as we know, take a rather bemused attitude toward the Earthlings' excessive emotionalism. The Earthlings, for their part, are quite sure that Vulcans place too much value on logic and calculation. Each learns something from the other, which allows a measure of harmony, even affection, to exist between them. But each retains the belief in the essential correctness of its worldview. One does not have to be a cultural relativist in order to be tolerant of other views, at least not when survival is at stake. The Klingons would present a special problem, since, their culture is organized around a distrustful belligerence . . . The solution does not require that others accept the values of the Klingons, or that they regard that value as being as good as any other. The solution requires, first, that we recognize its existence; second, that we examine ourselves to see how much we are like Klingons; and third, that we try to find in Klingon culture elements of which we wholeheartedly approve. (Postman, 1996, p. 109)

Thus, when it comes to the question of securing a measure of sustainable, prosperous and peaceful existence on this global spaceship of ours, the wisdom of the age seems to be that what we need is the combined forces of knowledge and good will. This wisdom operates in, at least, two areas of experience. There is the relationship between the crew and the spaceship, i.e. the attitude of humans to the physical environment. Science and technology allow us to exploit the planet's resources to our advantage but – as we are prone to believe – also give us the power to render the planet inhospitable to most, if not all, forms of life, including human life. We need knowledge and good will to use Earth's resources responsibly. There are also the relationships among the crew members, i.e. the humanity in bulk. This area of experience can be further subdivided. On one hand, we need knowledge and good will to build – on both a national and international level – a system in which the fruits of human labour are distributed in a just manner. On the other hand, we need knowledge and good will – again on a national and international level – to ensure coexistence, as peaceful as possible, and cooperation, as fruitful as possible,

among individuals and groups of different interests and worldviews. In other words, well-informed mutual understanding and sympathy towards other human beings are supposed to be the twofold antidote to many of the ailments peculiar to our present existence in a world of a population nearing eight billion, a world tightly knit by physical and digital means of rapid communication, where individuals and groups of people representing disparate, sometimes irreconcilable, systems of conventional behaviour, values, beliefs and ideals interact within societies and across national borders on an unprecedented scale, a world of global risks and global opportunities. What we see here are the three challenges of our age, one environmental and two political, namely our socio-economic system and intercultural relations. The intercultural challenge of living on “Spaceship Earth” is of special interest to this paper and will be explored further.

## THE WAR OF THE WORLDS

The “Spaceship Earth” metaphor, used as a rhetorical device in the context of intercultural relations, offers a lofty ideal of humanity united, despite cultural differences, for the purpose of ensuring its own survival. A self-styled realist might find it hard to discern what is more nebulous: the conviction that the ideal is achievable via systematic initiation into an anthropological sensitivity or the belief that a common goal defined in abstract terms, i.e. an appeal to the collective interest of humanity, can truly inspire people to look beyond their individual interest or the interest of their particular group. Of course, a sound case can be made – as it was made by Postman – that cultural differences, when recognized, understood, and tamed, may conceivably turn from a hindrance into an advantage. From this point of view, diversity is seen not only as a source of the kind of richness that we like to experience to satiate our deep-seated romantic thirst for the exotic but also as an invaluable resource of creative tensions. Indeed, history teaches us that when a civilisation is pulled in opposite directions by competing attitudes toward life – as it was the case with *Christianitas*, pulled in opposite directions by disparate concepts of truth<sup>2</sup> – it needs not shatter

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<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to bridge the apparent gap between revelation and philosophy, publicists of conservative leanings are sometimes eager to argue that what came to be known as the Western civilisation emerged and achieved its greatness through a sort of fusion

but can, at times, produce great wisdom and great beauty, just like a tense string produces music. Although these attitudes may develop alongside one another organically within a civilisation, they are often inspired by foreign influence. History, however, also teaches us that contact between individuals and populations of varying customs, values, beliefs and ideals is, too often, a source of less creative, and more destructive tensions. There is also an intuitive conviction, one often contradicted by historical evidence and quite idealistic in its own way, that individuals, and indeed peoples, who are culturally similar usually find it easier to get along, while individuals and peoples of different cultural backgrounds tend to clash with one another. On a more sophisticated level of academic study this view can develop into a type of theory, or even a type of philosophy of history, that can be seen as a polar opposite of the “Spaceship Earth” metaphor, for although it also requires an imagination operating on a global scale, it lacks an optimistic attitude when it comes to the possibility of overcoming cultural differences or building a sort of global “superculture” based on the principle of universal tolerance. Theories of this type may be dubbed the “war of the worlds” narratives.

A long chain of such narratives stretches from the height of the colonial era in the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the way to the turbulent beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked by the September 11 attacks. The most influential of the more recent iterations is, of course, the one elaborated by Samuel Huntington (1996). Huntington’s thesis, as it is well known, stands in contrast to Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) concept of the “end of history”. The latter suggested that the post-Cold War era will be shaped by an expansion of a set of values and ideals – human rights, liberal democracy, free market

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of “Jerusalem” and “Athens” (Shapiro, 2019, pp. xxiv–xxvii, 17). It could be argued, however, that the movement of Western intellectual history was animated by rather futile attempts to fully reconcile these attitudes that can exist side by side, for better or worse, only in a state of an uneasy tension. An attempt to merge them, finally, amounts to elevating one at the cost of the other with a detrimental effect to life (both theoretical and active). A biblical scene may be invoked to illustrate the chasm between these attitudes, namely the exchange between Pontius Pilate and Jesus of Nazareth over the notion of truth (Jn. 18:33–38). One might hesitate to interpret this as a “clash of cultures” – the modern notion of culture is foreign to Mediterranean antiquity (Strauss, 1997, pp. 377–378). Some scholars, however, would readily see Pilate’s attitude as a product of Occidental intellectualism and Jesus as a religious figure representing an Oriental type of wisdom, Pilate as a rational sceptic and Jesus as a man of faith and moral will (Babbitt, 1924, p. 172).

economy and the like – supposedly infused with a singular potential to be universally accepted and, as the final logical steps of the historical process, destined to engulf the entire globe and reshape all of the diverse ways of life and worlds of thought of its inhabitants. Huntington, conversely, argued that humanity cannot be moulded into a single global community by a set of values and ideals of clearly Western origin, a set of values and ideals that, despite the universalistic pretence, might easily be seen by their would-be recipients as an ideological extension of Western imperialism. He speculated that what will emerge from the collapse of the bipolar world of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be a geopolitical and social landscape shattered along the lines of cultural, especially religious, differences.

Nuances aside, the crux of a “war of the worlds” narrative is straightforward: humanity is divided into more or less clear-cut cultural or civilisational blocks and the world events are shaped mainly by tensions and conflicts between groups of people representing different and – to a large extent – irreconcilable ways of life. Interaction between disparate groups of people is always a risky bargain. So is any attempt of creating a “multicultural society”. One may hope for fruitful exchange and mutual benefits; the dangers, however, that present themselves when different, if not outright opposing systems of conventional norms of behaviour, values and ideals border one another or mix within one political entity, are real. From verbal misunderstandings to physical violence, from gradual social disintegration to bloody wars of conquest and forceful subjugation – history is filled with disconcerting examples. When used in a more ideological than academic context, a “war of the worlds” narrative can easily work as a sort of conceptual engine of a rhetoric designed to rouse a type of xenophobic sentiment. What comes to mind are dark visions – ranging from warnings rooted in sound reason to hysterical call-to-arms raised by political populists – of an alien menace, of masses of invaders from without or foreign elements from within, threatening the very existence of the one true civilisation. Today, the “barbarians at the gates of Rome” variant of the “war of the worlds” narrative is employed most readily in the context of peoples from North Africa and Middle East moving into Western countries, especially in the context of the ongoing migration crisis in Europe.

There is also the “East versus West” variant, employed, for example, by both United States and Russia, in which the opposing parties are fond of styling themselves as defenders of this-or-that value or claiming



to represent a spiritual quality of which the opponent (in diplomatic parlance: “our Western partners” or “Russian friends”) is deprived of. During the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, we have become more accustomed to the thought of a sole pivotal process destined to shape the world events for decades to come – the confrontation, namely, between the United States, the leading Western power, and China, a mighty Eastern dragon finally awoken from its deep slumber, ripe to reassert itself as a global superpower and ready to question the American hegemony. It may be argued, of course, that the competition between these two powerhouses is primarily geopolitical in nature. Nevertheless, the rhetoric that surrounds it can easily be equipped with a cultural component. The United States, when speaking as a custodian of the global *status quo* established after the dissolution of the USSR, may style itself as a defender of presumably universal values of individual freedom, democracy, and so on and so forth. In a different context, however, they may flip the tone and become the embodiment of Western values rooted in a strange mixture of Greek philosophy, Roman law, the so-called Judeo-Christian religious tradition, along with the secular wisdom of the Enlightenment. Depending on the intended recipient of the narrative, universal values can reveal themselves to be distinctly particular while the guardian of human dignity and freedom can morph into a defender of the West, a bulwark against the menace of a collectivist tyranny of Asiatic origins.

It should be stressed that conceits of superiority – spiritual, material, or both – and the feeling of a way of life being besieged by inferior, yet cunning, more numerous or more aggressive forces are not a Western invention. Nor are they peculiarly modern. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1987, p. 38) may have dispensed with “facts” – although it is only fair to mention that what he had in mind was most likely the historical account of the Bible – in order to put forth his influential theory of original human pity and the universal love that, supposedly, stems from it. Alas, the stubborn facts of human experience, including those represented symbolically in biblical stories, do suggest that, throughout known history, ethnocentrism accompanied by xenophobia has been a normal human attitude, indeed, a rather primordial attitude, if not, simply, an attitude deeply rooted in the brute facts of our evolutionary development. In any complex society this attitude can be used as a building block of the political ideology of a tribe, state, or a coalition of tribes or states. What comes to mind is the widespread phenomenon of adopting endoethnonyms synonymous,

more-or-less, with the word “human” or claims of superiority expressed in the very name of a political entity (e.g. *tianxia* of the ancient Chinese). It must be noted, however, that the modern era has introduced its own special innovations and has made the “war of the worlds” narrative its own by infusing it with romantic sensibility and a new sense of global scale. Furthermore, these two elements are accompanied by a comparatively recent realisation of the most basic consequences of the spread of modern science and technology.

These include the plain fact of evening-up the odds. When looked upon in a broad historical context, the measure of technical superiority enjoyed by European powers during the colonial era seems more and more a transient anomaly. We may view the clashing “worlds” – or the “worlds” may style themselves – as representing disparate ways of life, yet, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has become harder and harder to view them as being worlds apart in terms of might conjured up by advanced technology. The uneasiness experienced by the West of today, confronted by the strides of material progress made by China, is a sentiment similar to the one felt more than a century ago by those who expected that the Asiatic powers – humiliated and resentful – would soon be ready to challenge Western supremacy. The crushing defeat of the Russian Empire by a recently industrialized Japan during the war of 1904–1905, for example, served as a catalyst to some forms of the “Yellow Peril”.

The issues discussed so far amount to a peculiar conundrum. We worry that the same technology, which is capable, to a certain extent, of setting humanity free from the tyranny of nature, is also capable of destroying our planet. At the same time, we believe that only through technology we may deliver ourselves from extinction. The consensus seems to be that the best solution to our environmental problems would be a technological solution that would allow us to preserve both the fruits of material progress and the natural environment. Since it must be a solution implemented on a global scale, we need to unite the crew of “Spaceship Earth”. The crew, however, comprises of groups of aliens unable to overcome their differences. Here, we turn to lofty ideals; but we also turn to technology as means of putting these ideals into practice. We fear a war fought between “worlds” equally equipped in advanced means of horrific destruction. At the same time, we believe that technology can help us avert this catastrophe. On one hand, by bestowing as much material comfort as possible to as many human beings as possible, thus removing the chief reason for resentment. On the

other hand, by bringing us all together through modern means of communication, thus dispersing the fog of ignorance which we believe to be the chief source of ethnocentrism and xenophobia.

In this context, my argument may seem somewhat controversial. I agree with the likes of Postman that the difficult ability to open one's mind and heart to a different attitude toward life is something that we are very much in need of today. Since I intend to argue that comparative study of works of culture is a useful tool in order to exercise one's imagination to that purpose, it seems that I also agree with the importance of fostering a kind of anthropological sensitivity. Where I disagree, however, with contemporary common sense, is on the notion that what humanity must achieve for the purpose of the greater good is the feat of overcoming differences, especially cultural differences. Despite more popular notions at hand, I would argue that what is the special challenge of our time springs not from clashes between irreconcilable ways of life (i.e. cultures) but from a certain unity – possibly a global unity – in viewing life, a paradoxical unity indeed, for it is a type of unity that is setting people both apart and against one another. It is precisely this central unity, existing amidst peripheral differences, that we should strive to overcome. In order to do so, however, we must realize its existence. I believe that this difficult realisation could be facilitated by exercising our imagination through a certain type of comparative study of cultures.

## THE IDEAL OF UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD

Although a fair amount of self-flattery is involved in the conviction that humans are “rational animals”, there is some truth to it as well. Alas, it is from the type of rationality that I have in mind that springs the chief impulse undermining the humanitarian appeal of the “Spaceship Earth” metaphor. To act in one's self-interest or in the interest of one's group seems a rational course of action for a human being confronted with the ultimate danger. When his own life, and the life of his kin, is at stake, why should he be moved by an abstract concept of a threat to all humanity? When his own group is safe and enjoys material comfort, why should he be bothered by the lot of those alien to him? Finally, why should an individual or a group of people striving to lift themselves to what is considered a high, or simply adequate, standard of living feel obliged to comply with restrictions imposed

on their growth by individuals and groups of people who already enjoy what seems to be universally desired? In other words, a vision of casting differences aside and working together for the common good of humanity seems a rather moot point. Although it has a pleasant ring to it in theory and may inspire new, and perhaps less ironic (but more naïve) versions of John Lennon's *Imagine*, from the perspective of powerful individuals and political entities struggling for dominion over our "spaceship" and its resources, it remains a sterile idealism, useful only as a rhetorical device in the cynical game of geopolitics. What prevails in the realm of action, it could be argued, is the "every-man-for-himself" attitude. It would seem, therefore, that in order to descend from a humanitarian dreamland, the vision of a united humanity needs to be equipped with at least a semblance of concrete justification to complement the awareness of global obstacles surmountable only by global efforts. Here, the ideal of universal brotherhood comes into play.

In the West, the development of this ideal could be associated with Christian concepts of God the Creator of heaven and earth and Father to all creation. Looking to the East, one can find spiritual traditions even more consequential when it comes to inspiring a sense of oneness of all existence and the spirit of universal compassion that may spring from it. Nevertheless, in many traditional religions, be they Western or Eastern, and whatever their metaphysical assumptions may be, one can observe a more or less pronounced selectiveness that is almost absent from our modern humanitarian ideal of universal brotherhood. Christianity, insisting on the grace of faith as the path to the brotherhood in Christ (Gal. 3:23–29), and Buddhism, prescribing a common form of strenuousness (*appamāda*) to those who strive to follow the *Dhamma*, however remote metaphysically, are similar on this central point.

It seems that a more naturalistic, pantheistic for example, religious outlook is more conducive to a belief in universal brotherhood achieved without supernatural intervention or conscious moral effort. Modern believers in universal brotherhood, however, to find an adequate rationale for their specific "canons of satisfaction" (Hulme, 1936, pp. 30–35), need not turn to religion at all, at least in the traditional sense of the word. They may turn to science for both reason and inspiration. Genetic research and mathematical models used to map human ancestry may serve the purpose. Notions of "Mitochondrial Eve" and "Y-chromosomal Adam" come to mind as examples of scientific constructs readily appropriated

by moralists, or scientists turned moralists, who wish to convince others that, for the reason that we are all related, we should treat one another as family members do. What is worth mentioning is the fact that scientists themselves do not shy away from spinning their findings to satisfy the humanitarian attitude. In a letter published in *Nature* in 2004, a group of scientists, after a couple of pages of precise analysis of a set of computer simulations, concluded that the most recent common ancestor of all living humans “lived in the relatively recent past – perhaps within the last few thousand years”, most likely somewhere in eastern Asia. This is – of course – a very interesting finding. What I find equally interesting, however, is the hue of a moral statement visible in the very last sentence of the letter:

But to the extent that ancestry is considered in genealogical rather than genetic terms, our findings suggest a remarkable proposition: no matter the languages we speak or the colour of our skin, we share ancestors who planted rice on the banks of the Yangtze, who first domesticated horses on the steppes of the Ukraine, who hunted giant sloths in the forests of North and South America, and who laboured to build the Great Pyramid of Khufu. (Rohde, Olson & Chang, 2004, p. 565)

It is hard to escape the impression that what one encounters here is a part of a moral, rather than scientific, equation. The proposition should inspire us – the suggestion seems to be – to look beyond accidental differences, both physical and cultural, and realize, in the fashion of Gandhi, that all humanity is one family.

It remains a secret what kind of alchemy may turn a scientific explanation of a certain state of things into a convincing rationale for a certain moral behaviour. The expectation that the awareness of a shared genealogy should inspire people to overcome their differences is somewhat tenuous. Why should it bear fruits on a global scale when it does not work on a scale of what is conventionally recognized as family relations? The reader will forgive – I hope – the following truism: conflicts among blood relatives are not unheard of. Furthermore, historically speaking, familial bonds served as a spur for domestic and international political strife at least as often as they served as a bridle for it. What comes to mind, for example, is the hope that familial bonds between monarchs of Europe would somehow prevent the violent implosion of the international order of the *Belle Époque*. The implosion occurred in 1914, when, unsurprisingly, cold

political and military calculations trumped the sense of kinship shared by the ruling houses, just as the nationalistic sentiment prevailed over the fraternal spirit that was supposed to unite the European workers in a general strike against capitalistic oppression and militant imperialisms.

In the years immediately preceding the Great War, many also believed that the danger of a full-scale military confrontation would be averted, because the European states shared too many connections – economic, cultural, etc. In other words, in the “globalized” world of the *Belle Époque* there were those who believed that the prospect of universal progress achieved through international cooperation would triumph over the prospect of achieving national goals through confrontation. The sense of European unity, however, quickly dissolved. In hindsight, although we may see the Great War as a result of bickering and competition between European nations of similar cultural background, it should be remembered how readily the allied propaganda employed the “war of the worlds” narrative to it. Scientific and cultured Germans became the barbaric “Huns” and the western allies – defenders of civilisation. From the German perspective (elaborated in *Der Aufruf ‘An die Kulturwelt!’* manifesto from 1914), on the other hand, the war was pictured as a conflict in defence of an aspiring *Kultur* surrounded by aggressors.

It is hard, then, to view a sense of human brotherhood, however imagined, as a foundation for the vision of a united “Spaceship Earth” to build upon. The same can be said of the hope that tightening material ties through commerce and technology could help us disperse the fog of ignorance that breeds distrust and conflict. What comes to mind is the famous passage by Henry David Thoreau:

We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough. (Thoreau, 1854, pp. 57–58)

To bring the discussion back to the supposed moral implication of the above-mentioned *Nature* letter, we can complement Thoreau with an

anecdote about Irving Babbitt (1865–1933), a Harvard professor and the leader of the so-called New Humanism movement. In a book of recollections, one of the authors (Manchester, 1941, p. 133) contributed the following souvenir:

When, speaking of my return journey to the Middle West, I mentioned stopping on the way to visit relatives, “That is all very well,” he [Babbitt] said, succinctly, “provided you have anything in common with them.”

This may seem a harsh thing to say to a man who simply wanted to visit his family. Babbitt’s reply, however, is magnificently sober and points to an important question: what type of connection, or unity, truly brings people together?

## THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CULTURES AS AN EXERCISE OF IMAGINATION

To explore this issue, we may turn to an essay by Babbitt entitled *Buddha and the Occident*. Designed to relate the spiritual wisdom of early Buddhism to the Christian tradition of the West and contrast both with the expansive attitude towards life characteristic of Western modernity and readily adopted throughout the world, it was published posthumously and intended as an introduction to Babbitt’s translation of the *Dhammapada*. It opens with the following words:

The special danger of the present time would seem to be an increasing material contact between national and racial groups that remain spiritually alien. (Babbitt, 1936, p. 513)

Bearing in mind the fact that the essay was penned more than eighty years ago, one may assume that what he encounters here is an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century specimen of the “war of the worlds” narrative. It would also be easy to dispense with this remark as an introduction to a “barbarians at the gates of Rome” diatribe uttered by an epigone of the Anglo-Saxon “genteel tradition”. Both intuitions, however, would miss the mark. Although it is true that here and elsewhere Babbitt pointed to potential dangers of material closeness and spiritual alienation (Babbitt, 1908, pp. 95–96), the “would

seem to be” qualification suggests that he treated the problem not primarily in terms of what we understand today as intercultural relations.

On the surface, the thought seems very familiar and still current. Material closeness combined with ethnocentric ignorance and xenophobia is one of the greatest threats to peace, progress and harmonious coexistence in a “globalized”, “multicultural” world. Babbitt, however, was adamant in stating that knowledge and sympathy – the chief virtues professed by those who embrace the cosmopolitan spirit – are not enough to truly commune with each other:

The modern cosmopolitan is to be blamed not for developing on a magnificent scale the virtues of expansion [e.g. scientific knowledge and universal sympathy] but for setting up these virtues as a substitute for the virtues of concentration. He would have us believe that every man can fly off on his own tangent, and then in some mysterious manner, known only to romantic psychology, become every other man’s brother; and that the same process can be repeated on the national scale. There may after all be something in the traditional idea that in order to come together men need to take on the yoke of a common discipline. (Babbitt, 1912, pp. 27–28)

A belief that differences of outlook can be reconciled by sympathy is at best a form of wishful thinking. At worst, it breeds a somewhat tyrannical attitude. A cultural relativist is forced to base his attitude on a statement that no one culture can claim superiority of its values, beliefs and ideals, yet in order to do so he must be thoroughly convinced that his values, beliefs and ideals of cultural relativism are in fact both absolute and superior, and that the world would be better off if his attitude was universally adopted. As I suggested earlier, such an attitude, in practice, very much resembles what would seem to be its opposite – ethnocentrism. This could be added to Babbitt’s list of conceits of superiority as chief obstacles to a better understanding between cultures – especially cultures conventionally, and somewhat artificially, as Babbitt was keen to add, grouped as belonging to the West on the one hand and to the East on the other (Babbitt, 1936, pp. 513–515).

Babbitt was a careful student of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century epoch of expansion that bred legions of individuals who believed that scientists and progressive intellectuals would form an avant-garde of human brotherhood, an international community, a church, as it were, preaching the gospel of material and moral progress achieved through science, technology and



sympathy. He sharply contrasted their illusions and disillusion with what he considered to be a premodern type of spiritual cosmopolitanism:

. . . literature that expressed the mind of the Middle Ages was in the highest degree cosmopolitan, but cosmopolitan in the older and what may turn out to be the only genuine sense – that is, it rested primarily on a common discipline and not on a common sympathy. [Ernest] Renan . . . dreams of an international fraternity of savants, “an empyrean of pure ideas, a heaven in which there is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither German nor Latin.” Saint Paul in the passage that Renan is here paraphrasing says that these and like distinctions disappear for those who have become “one in Christ.” Now Christ, for Saint Paul, is evidently *the living intuition of a law that is set above the ordinary self; by taking on the yoke of this law men are drawn together as to a common centre*. Renan’s notion that simply by collaborating in the expansion of scientific knowledge men can achieve the union that, according to Saint Paul, is only to be achieved by spiritual concentration, may turn out to be Utopian; and it is the fate of the utopist to suffer sudden and severe disillusion. Renan had his disillusion in 1870. He expected the new Christ to come from Germany, as someone has put it, and instead he got Bismarck . . . “Let us suppress these unhealthy outbursts of national self-love,” cries Renan. But in the name of what principle? In a crisis, the altruistic impulse either towards other individuals or towards other nations is likely to seem to most men pale and unsubstantial compared with the putting forth of personal or national power. (Babbitt, 1912, pp. 26–27, my italics)

Babbitt saw the ideal of human brotherhood based on universal sympathy as nothing more than a “romantic chimera”. Real brotherhood is not a feeling or an instinct, it is a difficult path of deliberate action that brings similar fruits to those who follow it. In practice, spiritual alienation springs not from ignorance or a misunderstanding of the beliefs and values of others but from the act of moving – via an intricate interplay between will, imagination and reason – in opposite spiritual directions.

At this point, we may return to the “would seem to be” qualification from the first paragraph of *Buddha and the Occident*. In a way, Babbitt finally refutes the idea that spiritual alienation combined with material closeness is one of the special dangers of the present age. The true danger is that, with gradual disintegration of traditional religious and humanistic disciplines through which – as Edmund Burke (2003, p. 67) claimed – a civilized life is born and maintained, humanity will uniformly adopt a thoroughly expansive attitude towards life bereft of an ethical centre or a “principle of

control” that is set above the ordinary, impulsive life of a human as a part of phenomenal nature and bestows on him a sense of humility and measure. In effect, individuals and groups of people would be, indeed, spiritually alienated. This alienation, however, would result from an eccentric path shared by humanity despite superficial differences of culture. The cosmopolitan spirit that supposedly permeated the literature – as well as the art and philosophy – of medieval Europe was, in Babbitt’s mind, a corollary of a spiritual orientation that brought the diverse continent into a form of unity. This unity – a **common sense** expressed in works of creative imagination – was at the root of a set of conventions that amounted to what may be called the Christian civilisation. Babbitt did not paint a utopian picture of Europe in the Middle Ages. It was populated and governed by human beings, not by angels, and had to endure its share of stupidity, violence and misery. Not an insignificant amount of medieval horrors sprung from the “crusader spirit”, namely, the attempts “to achieve spiritual ends collectively through the machinery of the secular order” (Babbitt, 1924, p. 285) and from various forms of “theological terror” (Babbitt, 1940, pp. 76–79) – i.e. more or less extreme attempts to restrict the restless movement of the human imagination by the chains of unwavering dogma. At their best, however, medieval men were imaginatively equipped to grasp and symbolically express “the living intuition of a law that is set above the ordinary self”, a law that draws those who perceive it to “a common centre”. Without any equivalent of such a perception, humanity – equipped, as it is at present, with an unprecedented measure of power and control over the physical realm – is in danger of self-destruction. In 1924, Babbitt offered an assessment of the condition of the Occidental man that holds true to this day, with an important caveat that it is no longer limited to the Western nations, as it is equally true of the powerful global players from every corner of the world:

. . . the power of Occidental man has run very much ahead of his wisdom. The outlook might be more cheerful if there were any signs that Occidental man is seeking seriously to make up his deficiency on the side of wisdom. On the contrary, he is reaching out almost automatically for more and more power. If he succeeds in releasing the stores of energy that are locked up in the atom – and this seems to be the most recent ambition of our physicists – his final exploit may be to blow himself off the planet. We are told that our means of destruction are growing so terrible that no one will venture to use them – the same argument that was heard before the [Great] War. But at the same time

that we are heaping up these means of destruction, the breakdown of the traditional controls combined with the failure thus far to supply any adequate substitute, is creating fools and madmen who will not hesitate to use them. (Babbitt, 1924, pp. 143–144)

In other words, our “spaceship” may turn out to be inhabited and governed by a primitive species of tribal and territorial apes equipped with advanced means of terrific destruction. From biotechnology to AI, the list of potentially fatal exploits has grown in the past one hundred years and, as of yet, no “substitute for the traditional controls” has been found, unless one is to believe in the transformative power of some humanitarian rhetoric of the type outlined in this paper.

Babbitt was neither, it should be stressed, an advocate of traditionalism, nor a sectarian. In the last paragraph of *Buddha and the Occident* he went as far as to suggest that “persons of positive and critical temper” may better appreciate Christian insights by comparing them with the teachings of early Buddhism, a spiritual tradition comparatively more reliant on immediate experience than dogma. Doctrinal divergencies aside, both traditions – Babbitt claimed (1936, p. 97) – are in “psychological agreement”. Although he was an “eclectic philosopher”, drawing inspiration from various – and seemingly remote – traditions, he stressed that his method did not amount to an “eclectic philosophy” (Babbitt, 1932, pp. xxxiv–xxxvii). He would probably see himself as an exponent of what he described as genuine cosmopolitanism. He also professed to be thoroughly positive and critical; sceptical of all authority and dogma, he scanned the “wisdom of the ages” in search of “psychological” and “experiential” truth hidden in traditional symbols adopted by disparate cultures and civilisations:

A student of the past cannot help being struck by the fact that men are found scattered through different times and countries and living under very different conventions who are nevertheless in virtue of their insight plainly moving towards a common centre . . . In the writings attributed to Confucius one encounters, mixed up with much that is almost inconceivably remote from us, maxims that have not lost their validity to-day; maxims that are sure to be re-affirmed wherever and whenever men attain to the level of humanistic insight. In the oldest Buddhist documents again one finds along with a great deal that is very expressive of ancient India, and thus quite foreign to our idiosyncrasy, a good sense which is even more imaginative and inspired, and therefore more universal, than that of Confucius, and which is manifested, moreover,

on the religious rather than on the humanistic level. We are dealing here with indubitable facts, and should plant ourselves firmly upon them as against those who would exaggerate either the constant or the variable elements in human nature. (Babbitt, 1919, pp. 175–176)

What we have here is a proposition that comparative study of cultures may very well be the key to open our modern – at once naturalistic and humanitarian – imagination to a truly different point of view, a point of view shared by individuals scattered across time and space, expressed through local symbols and in various historical contexts. We only need to know what to look for – not for romantic thrills of the transient and the exotic but for a perception of a certain “oneness that is always changing” (Babbitt, 1919, p. xiii). In other words, and to paraphrase Leo Strauss (1994, p. 329), when comparing the wisdom of other cultures and ages to the wisdom of our own culture and age, we must be prepared to learn something not merely about this wisdom but also **from** it.

## THE CHALLENGE OF ATTITUDE

Strauss (1994, p. 329) distinguished two types of understanding the philosophers of the past: unhistorical and historical. The latter is an attempt to understand an earlier philosopher exactly as he understood himself. The former is based on a presupposition that it is possible to understand an author of the past better than he understood himself. This presupposition can be expressly stated or held unconsciously and reveals itself in attempts to assess the contribution of an earlier author to “the treasure of knowledge and insight which has been accumulated throughout the ages” (Strauss, 1994, p. 322). It is a belief that the “collective insight” available today is superior to the “collective insight” of the past. From this point of view, history is treated as a cumulative progress not only in science and technology but also in philosophy, literature and art.

We cannot – wrote Strauss – be seriously interested . . . in the past, if we know beforehand that the present is, in the most important respect, superior to the past. (Strauss, 1994, p. 323)

This potentially leads to treating the views expressed in the past as merely a preparatory stage for the modern outlook. An attempt at

historical understanding is not necessarily the best way to solve this problem. Its intention is to understand the past in its own terms. The intention, however, is contradicted by practice. A historicist, like a cultural relativist, must assume that all views are equally true in the sense that they express the truth of the time and place of their origin. In the context of history of philosophy, this leads to an assumption that a thinker always expresses the spirit of his epoch. A thinker might have claimed to have found **the truth** (not merely **a truth** of his time) but a historicist knows beforehand that all thinkers who made such a claim were mistaken (Strauss, 1994, p. 324). As it was the case with the unhistorical understanding, the historical understanding of this type reveals itself as operating on an assumption of superiority of the modern insight over the insights of past epochs.

With some caution, we may extend these comments to include not only the discipline of history of philosophy but also the comparative study of cultures. Not only philosophy but also myths, religious beliefs and literature (that used philosophies, myths and religious beliefs as its material) may be seen as expressions of a spirit of an age on the one hand and as more or less deliberate attempts at expressing some universal truth of human experience on the other. From our modern point of view, it is easy to dismiss the latter pretence by stating, for example, that this-or-that notion held by people living in a given time and place cannot be true because it is contrary to what we know today. Since a given notion cannot be true in this respect, its interpretation must assume that it served some function. Revealing it can be used to learn something about these people, something that they most likely did not know about themselves. This approach seems characteristic of attempts at viewing the past through the lenses of modern constructs or viewing various cultures through the lenses of constructs specific to Western modernity, e.g. the ideas of history as progress, class warfare, subjugation and emancipation of marginalized groups, etc. This attitude is also visible in attempts at causal explanations of forms of culture as products of socio-economic conditions or pressures from the natural environment. All these approaches may produce useful knowledge. Strauss, however, suggested a different strategy. "To take a serious teaching seriously – he wrote – one must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true" (Strauss, 1994, p. 324). In the context of history of philosophy, this forces the student to assume that earlier philosophy is in some important respect superior to modern philosophy. This does not necessarily mean that he will fall into a trap of progressivism *à rebours*,

although the danger of erecting a regressive utopia certainly exists. He has, however, much to gain here. He can turn his attention to the past with hope of discovering something truly new – an unknown attitude toward life; “he embarks on a journey whose end is completely hidden from him: he is not likely to return to the shore of his time as the same man who left it” (Strauss, 1994, p. 325). The same may be applied to a practitioner of comparative study of cultures – past and present. As mentioned before, this means – in the field of history of culture as well as in the context of contemporary studies of cultural diversity – a readiness to learn not merely about others but also **from** others.

In the spring semester of 2016, I had a pleasure to conduct a series of informal symposiums entitled “Orient–Occident” with a small group of students at the Institute of Intercultural Studies of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. In the spring semester of 2019, I covered parts of the same material in a form of a similarly named elective course. Although these meetings were devoted to close reading of texts sourced from various cultures, the title of the whole endeavour was a deliberate misdirection on my part. The material included the following sources paired for the purpose of comparative analysis: Ibn Tufail’s *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*; *The Dhammapada* and Saint Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans* (complemented by fragments of *The Imitation of Christ*); *Analects* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Obviously, describing this eclectic reading list as consisting of texts representing “Orient”, on the one hand, and “Occident”, on the other, is rather controversial. It would be impossible to treat a philosophical novel written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century by an Arab Andalusian Muslim polymath, a Buddhist scripture from the Pāli Canon and a collection of sayings attributed to Confucius as belonging to connected cultural traditions, not to mention the fact that only the latter two of these texts may be described as of eastern origin (in terms of geography). Students quickly realized that the “Occidental” part of the list may be criticized in a similar fashion, thus a deliberate use of stereotypes created an opportunity to question some preconceived notions. Firstly, the notion of a tradition stretching from “Plato to NATO” that forms a coherent attitude towards life and can be contrasted with other, non-Western, attitudes. Secondly, the notion that this attitude is native to men and women who identify themselves, or can be labelled, as “Westerners”. This allowed us to change our perspective. We were trying to approach each pair of texts as comparative students of human experience – human relation to nature,

society and the supernatural – expressed in various forms by individual imaginations shaped by accidents of history and culture. Presenting, in full detail, the approach and method animating the course would require an exposition much longer than the space permitted by this paper. For this reason, I will limit myself to some preliminary considerations.

It would be difficult to overstate the cultural importance of *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. In the last 300 years, this novel, originally published in 1719, provided inspiration for countless adaptations and commentaries. Its literary qualities aside, the value of Defoe's work is measured by the force with which the peripeties of the sailor from York resonate through the centuries. Robinson, not interested in settling on the "middle station" of life, embarked on a set of dangerous adventures. Following his instinctive drive, he finally reached what seemed to be the end of his journeys. He found himself removed from society and stranded on a desert island – an ample punishment for his crimes against good reason and the will of his father. The island became both his prison and his idyll, as well as a land ripe and ready for conquest. He executed God's command of subduing the earth in a peculiarly modern, i.e. Baconian, fashion by harnessing his will and aptitudes to take command of the surrounding environment. He not only survived but also made himself as comfortable as possible. When, after almost 30 years, he managed to escape the island, he left his estate thriving and settled by colonists. Through the course of his life, he never managed to conquer his own passions. Instead of shaping himself, he shaped the world according to his needs and desires. His adventures became an ingredient of one of the most important metaphors of the modern imagination. "The legend of the island", according to Czesław Miłosz (2009, pp. 29–39), is one of the "legends of modernity".

Defoe might have been inspired to write his novel by a 12<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical work, Ibn Tufail's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, which was translated into Latin and English in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although *Robinson Crusoe* differs from its predecessor in terms of plot, both share many similarities. Their goal is, to a large extent, didactic – to show what a human being can achieve without society. Both authors turn to similar devices. They place their heroes on a desert island and meticulously describe details of their everyday life. When comparing the outcome of Ibn Jakzan's and Robinson's efforts, we encounter an interesting disparity. The former conquered himself and became a perfect philosopher, the latter conquered the external natural world and built

a material civilisation. This central difference is highlighted by the background of peripheral similarities and connections. A comparative study of both texts as products of disparate types of imagination shaped in different times, places and cultural contexts can lend one a key to understand the differences between the minds of peoples to whom Ibn Tufail and Defoe directed their tales. In a wider context, it can be useful in understanding the crucial difference between the medieval and the modern approach to life (Strauss, 1994, p. 330).

Investigating central differences between superficially similar works of creative imagination can prove to be a fruitful method of studying the intercultural life of texts of culture and provide guideposts in the difficult task of grasping the central elements shaping the minds of individuals representing disparate communities. The method of comparative study of texts of culture, however, cannot stop at this point. It can be used to observe not only central differences on the background of peripheral similarities but also central similarities between minds shaped by disparate external conditions.

"If a one man conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquers himself, he is the greatest of conquerors", we read in the ancient *Dhammapada* (1936, p. 18). A similar thought may be found in the medieval *Imitation of Christ*: "Who hath a greater combat than he that laboreth to overcome himself?" (Thomas à Kempis, 1980, p. 29). When it comes to time and place of origin, cultural and natural environments as well as the metaphysical notions underlining their respective doctrines, these texts are divided by a chasm. If, however, we study the practical aspects of their teachings and turn our attention to the vision of inner work and fruits that it supposedly delivers, we can hear both speaking in one voice. They may drift apart on the currents of the constant flux of life and culture, but are brought close to one another by a common quality of intuition that looks beyond the veil of change and relativity.

The richness and variety of conventions that impose disparate and mutually incomprehensible – as we often tend to believe – forms on human life is truly bewildering. Sometimes, however, we encounter individuals who share common intuitions and are moving in a similar direction. This sense of oneness that seeks to be expressed in an infinite variety of forms, that one may experience while studying the great works of culture, prompted Ralph Waldo Emerson to confess that he was "struck . . . by the appearance, that one person wrote all the books . . . there is such



equality and identity both of judgment and point of view in the narrative, that it is plainly the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman” (Emerson, 1844, p. 253). Today, such openness to the element of oneness is not a type of sensibility most commonly found in the field of cultural studies, where enthusiasm for diversity takes precedence. It seems, however, that both attitudes are indispensable. The **intuition of the One** orients our attention to the universal elements of human experience. The **intuition of the Many** allows us to see these elements as they appear in the phenomenal world – expressed in transient forms specific to a given time, place and culture.

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